

**DUBOWITZ:** Hi everybody, I'm Mark Dubowitz, I'm the CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm really glad that you're tuning in to this very important and timely discussion. Before I introduce our speakers, for those of you who don't know us, FDD is a non-partisan policy institute, we're a source for timely research, analysis, and actual policy recommendations. We take no foreign government funding. Today's program is one of many that FDD hosts throughout the year. So, if you need more information on us, or on our events, please visit our website at [FDD.org](http://FDD.org).

We're also really pleased to co-host this event with the Anti-Defamation League. Since it was established back in 1913, a remarkable 108-year history, ADL has been a strong voice with the mission of stopping the defamation of the Jewish people and securing justice and fair treatment for all. ADL launched its Task Force on Middle East Minorities in 2018 with the mission of educating, advocating for and elevating those issues challenging the important and all-too-often overlooked communities across the Middle East. So, with that, I am pleased to introduce our panel today:

Sharon Nazarian is Senior Vice President of International Affairs at ADL and co-chairs ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities. Aykan Erdemir is a senior director of FDD's Turkey program, he's a former member of the Turkish Parliament, and he also is the co-chair of ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities. And finally, Marjan Greenblatt is the founder and director of the Alliance for Rights of All Minorities. She is a member also of ADL's Task Force. So, we are very grateful to these experts who've made the time to join us today and we're really looking forward to a really stimulating and important discussion.

Great guys. Well, thanks so much for joining. So, I just want to start, throughout the course of today's conversation, I hope we can describe both what the human rights situation in Iran is, but more importantly, what the United States and our partners around the world can do to support the Iranian people. So, both an analysis of the problem, but also some real specific recommendations that can be operationalized to help defend the Iranian people.

So, let's begin the conversation with Marjan, I wanted to ask you, obviously, Iran is a very diverse country. It's home to at least two indigenous religious groups. The Zoroastrians and the Baha'is, and Iran has allowed religious minorities to have representation in its parliament, for what that's worth. So, why are human rights advocates so concerned about the status of religious minorities inside Iran?

**GREENBLATT:** Thank you, Mark, for this opportunity and thanks to the ADL and FDD for hosting today's panel. To talk about the state of religious minorities or religious freedom in Iran, we have to have a couple of strategies for how to look at Iran, and what is happening there. One important strategy for evaluating what is happening in Iran is to understand the difference between perception and reality, between what the Iranian government is propagating to the outside world, and also the reality on the ground. Yes, on paper, since the Islamic revolution, the Iranian government has given certain privileges to certain religious groups. These are the Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians who are considered people of the book. And there has been, this privilege makes them actually second class citizens with certain privileges and representation in the Iranian parliament, and to celebrate their religious rituals behind closed doors in their places of worship or at home.

But when you scratch the surface of what is actually happening in Iran, you see that a vast population in the country, including the Sufis, the Sunnis, the Baha'is, and other religious groups, as well as atheists, have not been given any rights or any determination as to where they stand in terms of rights and privileges as citizens in the country. So, yes there are certain privileges and considerations made for those three religious groups I mentioned, but when you scratch the surface, you see that conversion out of Islam, for example, is against the law. And there are other problems that we will get into.

The second important way to look at Iran is to recognize that Iran was on the path for progress before the Islamic revolution. We had certain rights and privileges already given to all of the religious groups as equal citizens, equal to all the other Iranians. There was no differentiation between this religious group and that religious group. And some of the residual issues of discrimination and prejudice that existed were being addressed by the administration. But what happened in 1979 is that the path of progress stopped completely. And instead, there was a path of regression that was replaced in Iran. So, yes, we have to not only look at where the country is today, but we have to also look at where it was before.

And then lastly, we have to recognize that what happens in Iran could be described as a perpetual state of persecution, that many people, regardless of their religious beliefs, are experiencing significant persecution. But arguably the Baha'i population is experiencing more vulnerability and more suffering than any religious or ethnic group or any other distinct group in Iran. Just recently, there has been an escalation of pressures put on the Baha'i population for the ritual of their burials. And they are being prevented from burying their loved ones in their own cemeteries. And instead, there is a new pressure for them to bury their dead in a mass grave where they had actually killed former political prisoners.

So, this way they're putting the different groups against one another. And also, we have to recognize that right now, during the holiest month of Islam, the month of Ramadan, what is happening at Iftar, the most spiritual moment of the day that Iranian sanctioned television stations are intentionally showing television programs that are spewing anti-Baha'i propaganda, instigating, and instilling hatred in Iranian people against their own brothers and sisters. So, what you see in perceptions outside in our American media is not necessarily the reality of what is happening on the ground.

**DUBOWITZ:** So, thanks, Marjan. I wanted to also ask you, Sharon, so Marjan described this campaign of incitement against the Baha'is and other minorities inside Iran, and your organization, ADL published a monograph, a terrific monograph, earlier this year on the incitement relating to anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, and terrorism in Iran's state textbooks. But of course, I think as all of our viewers know who follow Iran, the textbooks are only one part of the regime's propaganda apparatus for promoting its extremist ideology. And it's obviously being used to recruit young people to spread hate, to incite terrorism. What are some of the additional ways in which the Islamic Republic propagates these messages? How do these messages relate to Iran's violation of human rights? And is there any reason to be hopeful when you survey the scene of what is being done in the United States and Europe and elsewhere to combat this?

**NAZARIAN:** First of all, Mark, I want to thank the FDD for partnering with ADL in this important panel, and to continue to raise awareness about the human rights abuses of the Iranian regime. It's a very important conversation. We're happy to be a part of it. With regards to incitement and really what the regime uses, the tools it uses at its disposal to spread hate and repress its own citizens, the regime is really good at it. You mentioned textbooks, but there's a massive ecosystem of real, state backed extremist propaganda and anti-Semitism and terrorism are all part and parcel of all of that. When you look at other education materials, besides the textbooks that you mentioned, looking, for example, at IRGC training manuals, looking at propaganda by the Basij paramilitary. These are all many, many avenues that the regime uses at its disposal to propagate hate.

In addition, we see educational materials produced by Iranian proxies across the region as well. For example, in textbooks such as scouting manuals, believe it or not, Hezbollah aligned educational institutions in Lebanon, looking at their textbooks, and we've done, in-depth reporting on that by my team. You also see educational materials used by

Houthi controlled ministries in Northern Yemen. This was exposed by the wonderful organization Impact-SE in recent weeks. So, the regime is very good at using many, many levers of spreading its hate.

One more avenue Iran holds a national cartoon contest backed by the state, for example. This year they held their third major collection of Iran state-backed Holocaust denial cartoons in recent months. And in fact, the State Department called this out. We documented it in several blogs. There was a cartoon contest even about COVID and how this is really something that it's propagated by Jews, by Zionists, and how it is spread due to anti-Semitic views. Tehran is teaching in his latest textbooks, for example right now, that this is a Western plot to spread panic by exaggerating the dangers of the disease. So, we see that the regime does not miss an opportunity to use whatever lever it has.

And finally, the massive apparatus for spreading propaganda in other languages. You've seen their externally facing propaganda channels, like Al-Alam, Press TV, foreign language editions of their networks, like Fox News. This is getting to Spanish speaking communities around the world and Latin America are getting it. And it's Iran that's providing the funding, training, and technical support for these kinds of TV networks, many of them spewing terrorist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Zionist propaganda. So, there's a lot there, groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, all of them, are supported, trained, and also financed in their content by the Islamic Republic. So, they see the net is wide and the damage inflicted is vast.

**DUBOWITZ:** Thanks, Sharon. Aykan, let me ask you, because Sharon is really talking about, and Marjan as well, about how the regime is propagating hate both inside Iran and globally. But of course, hate has consequences, including some serious violent consequences and Islamic Republic, their violations of human rights extend far beyond their borders as Tehran targets Iranian dissidents and the diaspora, and has a track record of bloody assassinations of Iranian dissidents. A country you know very well, Turkey is one place where these regime operatives are acting and have acted with impunity over the decades. Can you give us a sense of the threat matrix there? How does the Islamic Republic operate against members of the Iranian diaspora and talk a little bit about the Turkish government itself, Turkish intelligence services? What role do they play in this overseas campaign?

**ERDEMIR:** Mark, first of all, it's always a pleasure to join you on a panel, but today I'm also privileged to join Marjan and Sharon, two of my colleagues with whom I work very closely at the ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities. So, this is a family gathering for me. To answer your question, I have to begin by saying that we often pay great attention to Iran's egregious violations of human rights at home. But then when the Islamic Republic's long arm reaches beyond borders, we sometimes miss similar egregious violations. And Turkey happens to be one of the most important theaters of action for regime operatives. Since the Islamic revolution, there have been at least 20 documented cases of either targeted killings or kidnappings in Turkey targeting Iranian dissidents. Just to give you an example, in 2017, the founder of GEM TV, which is a Persian language satellite television network, was assassinated in Istanbul by the Islamic Republic's operatives and sadly not much media attention followed.

I'm sure we all followed the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi operatives. And there was vocal criticism around the world for a very good reason, but when the Islamic Republic did the same with Saeed Karimian, the GEM TV founder and his Kuwaiti partner, there wasn't a similar uproar. And the Turkish police did ultimately uncover clues as to the killing, but there was not the similar diplomatic pushback against Tehran. And this kind of impunity allows the regime to continue similar hit jobs in Turkey. Just two years later in 2019, a similar hit team, including two Iranian diplomats, assassinated another Iranian dissident Masoud Molavi Vardanjani in Istanbul. Vardanjani was a cyber security expert at Iran's defense ministry, left for Istanbul, and then became a vocal critic of the regime. And when the Turkish

police uncovered who was behind the killings, Ankara sat on this information for months and ultimately when two Iranian diplomats were outed as being participants in this assassination scheme, again, there wasn't a diplomatic pushback.

Now we also need to turn to some major names who act as Iranian operatives, regime operatives within Turkey. And one of the most notorious figures is Naji Sharifi Zindashti. This is a drug kingpin who has been implicated in multiple killings and abductions in Turkey. And the most recent one is last October when Zindashti's network, they were reportedly involved in the abduction, the drugging, kidnapping, and smuggling across the border of Habib Chaab. This is again an Iranian opposition leader who was based in Sweden.

Now what makes these cases really worrying is that regime operative such as Zindashti, not only can move with impunity within Turkey, but he has penetrated Turkey's political system, as well as the law enforcement system. When he was, for example, arrested for multiple murders and drug smuggling in Turkey, he was able to drive his way out of court. After only six months in prison, a judge released him. And by the time a prosecutor could get back to the case to issue another arrest warrant, he was already back in Iran. And since then, we now know that a senior AKP figure, a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey actually contacted the judge to allow for Zindashti's – basically Zindashti walking free from prison in Turkey. And this shows that Iran not only enjoys impunity but has penetrated the Turkish law enforcement system and the political system, so it carries such egregious violations of human rights in Turkey with great freedom.

**DUBOWITZ:** Aykan, could you say a quick follow up to that, a few words, you talk about sort of penetration of the political and legal elite in Turkey by Iran. There was obviously a notorious \$20 billion sanctions busting scheme involving Turkey, second largest state-owned bank and the Iranian-Turk who was involved in moving money and gold and other resources through Turkey to Iran, and bribes that were paid at the highest levels to officials of the Erdogan administration. To what extent was that sanctions-busting scheme, where people were focused on the economic piece of it, how is that inextricably linked to the extent to which Iran can operate with impunity in assassinating dissidents on its soil?

**ERDEMIR:** Actually, the Islamic Republic uses the exact MO in carrying out targeted killings and kidnappings as it does with sanctions evasion. In both cases, regime operatives penetrated the highest levels of Turkish politics and the legal system. They bribed senior figures. They were able to free their operatives when they were arrested.

Let me remind everyone that, when Reza Zarrab was arrested in Turkey for his sanctions evasion and bribery scandal, all the judges, and prosecutors, and police officers who were involved were either purged or jailed. Then Zarrab walked free. Only when he came to the United States, he was finally arrested, and he became state's witness.

This, I think, is a grim reminder that, when it comes to targeted killings and kidnappings, as well as when it comes to sanctions evasion, Tehran uses the exact same playbook of accessing senior figures in Turkish politics and law and bribing them by spending hundreds of millions of dollars. Just in the case of Zarrab, reportedly he spent more than \$150 million, basically to sweeten the deal for Turkish officials.

**DUBOWITZ:** Right. They look the other way on sanctions busting, and they look the other way on the assassination of innocent Iranian dissidents on their soil. Marjan, let me switch topics. I want to get back to Iran itself. We talked before about Iran's religious diversity, but obviously also Iran is represented by numerous ethnicities. These ethnic groups have, also in recent years, escalated their separatist claims, expressed a strong desire for autonomy, for the use of, certainly,

their own languages. Could a regional crisis, whether it's triggered by internal conflicts, foreign interventions, is there a risk that Iran could disintegrate along ethnic lines?

**GREENBLATT:** This is a very difficult question for most of us Iranians and Iranians who are extremely – Patriotism is part of our culture. It's part of our heritage. The possibility of a disintegrated Iran or a separatist movement taking shape in Iran is a very uncomfortable notion for all of us who love Iran and who want to see the country thrive and succeed. We want to see that the people are treated fairly and have an opportunity for prosperity and success.

Nonetheless, the reality on the ground is something that needs to be assessed. The reality on the ground to a large extent is a reality that the Islamic Republic has created and caused on its own soil through the policy of neglect. You were talking about all of these funds being given as bribes to foreign countries, but the funds that are necessary to be invested in Iran, especially with the marginalized populations across the borders of Iran, are not being invested. They're not being spent the way they should be in those regions. Whether it is as is done in Baluchestan, whether it is in Ahvaz, where the Arabs reside on the western border of the country, whether it is Kurdistan in the northwest of the country, or Baluchestan, as I mentioned earlier, on the eastern region of the country, these regions suffer from disproportionate levels of unemployment, poverty, and despair.

On top of it all, adding insult to injury, the ethnic minorities living in these areas are frequently arrested and jailed. Most of the time, the charges that are given to these populations is national security charges. Anything at all can be perceived as a national security charge in the eyes of the Islamic Republic. If they are organizing resources for their own humanitarian resources for the region, to benefit the people who have been neglected and marginalized by the central government, that can be seen as a ploy to topple the Islamic Republic. Or if they are trying to teach their own mother languages, again, that is seen as a threatening act. Individuals could be faced with years in jail and other even more severe punishments.

Also because of poverty in these regions, and because of lack of opportunity for economic mobility, in the Baluchestan region a lot of unemployed people are resorting to transport of fuel. Which is something that the Iranian regime benefits from but at the same time considers smuggling of fuel, and from time to time puts pressure on them and arrests those carriers.

Or in the Kurdistan region, there are transporters who are putting heavy, heavy boxes of goods and transporting them across the borders. Again, these individuals, these carriers who are really on the bottom of the economic pyramid of wealth in Iran, they are not only arrested and shot at, they're actually hunted. They are pursued by Islamic government officials. They're hunted and shot at directly. Many of them, if they don't die because of natural and environmental causes that they're facing in their perilous work, they are shot at and killed by the Islamic Republic.

There are definitely some intrinsic problems. Most of them are caused by the negligent policies of the Islamic Republic and the practice of repression. But also, because there are no exits, there are no opportunities and no light at the end of this tunnel for them to have any amount of hope, some of them are influenced by what is happening across the border, whether it is in Pakistan or in Iraq, or with the Kurdish nationalist movement. They are lured and tempted, thinking to themselves, "If life is not going to be good for me within the Iran borders, where else can I go?"

This in a way becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that the Iranian regime actually can take advantage of, and not only can use it against these people, again, but also, they can use to sow and foment more division, and hatred, and mistrust among all these populations who should actually be uniting with one another in face of all of this common repression.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. It's interesting. It sort of reminds me of what the Chinese Communist Party is doing in Xinjiang against Uyghur Muslims. It's raising the specter of the disintegration of China, and that Xinjiang will spin off and try to become autonomous, using that in order to justify the repression of Uyghur Muslims. Then when the frustration builds and there are some examples of violent reactions, then using that as further examples to come in and crack down.

If anything, if you're a great Iranian patriot, you would be somebody who would look at what the Islamic Republic or what the regime is doing itself to its own people and realize that the only force inside Iran that's not patriotic, that doesn't actually care about the unity of the Iranian state, is the very regime in Iran that's using these ethnic movements to try and justify its further repression.

**GREENBLATT:** Absolutely. First of all, the Chinese playbook is very well utilized inside the Iranian government. They share and leverage persecution strategies. The untold story here is that the only elements inside the country who are literally partitioning the country and giving it away is the Islamic Republic itself, whether it is with a deal with China to auction off and relinquish control of its southern areas, or it's a deal with Russia and partitioning of the Caspian Sea, it is exactly the Islamic Republic itself that is partitioning and giving up its own soil.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. I know. It's fascinating. The parallels you're drawing between the repression of the Chinese Communist Party, the oppression of the Islamic Republic, and the ways in which these two regimes work together, run the same playbooks, leverage similar technologies of oppression, you can see how this relationship between Beijing and Tehran is getting more and more concerning.

Sharon let's shift gears again. I want to ask you about, again, what can be done to monitor the regime's egregious human rights abuses, to report on them, but also how civil society, how the U.S. government can make important contributions to this reporting process. I mentioned the difference in media attention between the Khashoggi incident and the assassinations that had occurred on Turkish soil, shining a spotlight on this, detailed reporting on human rights abuses. Maybe you could talk about some real concrete examples of activists or leaders on both sides of the aisle who are standing together to draw attention to these important human rights issues.

**NAZARIAN:** Mark, I would say, first and foremost, it's very important that this has to be seen, framed, and acted upon as a bipartisan issue. It is very important that it is messaged to the Islamic Republic that not only the U.S., but also literally the whole world, is hand in hand. There's a consensus about the threat that Iran poses to its own people. That's very, very important.

On monitoring and reporting, I have to say that this is not an easy matter. This regime is very, very ruthless when it comes to messaging that it doesn't like getting out. I can tell you, specifically, even the Jewish community, the small Jewish community that remains, and I was a member of before my family immigrated to the U.S., it's a community we call a captured community, and therefore they are very reluctant to share information even with ADL. There's a lot of fear and apprehension about being punished. That goes through every single minority group that Marjan's referenced. It's very, very difficult. Monitoring is not easy. Having access to real information is difficult.

Part of what's needed is really the mere act of helping people get their stories out. The U.S. and other responsible governments play an important role in that, for example, circumventing communication restrictions that the government has put on. There's always more that could be done about that. Civil society networks play a very important role as well. They can accurately and effectively lift up people's stories, so the outside world really knows what's going on on the ground. Think tanks have to pay attention and analyze the information that's coming out.

As Aykan referenced, we at ADL did establish a Task Force on Middle East Minorities with a strong emphasis on Iran, but also going broadly to the rest of the region as well. We think that, as ADL, when we look at Iran as the number one state sponsor of antisemitism and of Holocaust-denial rhetoric, it is our responsibility, as a 108-year-old Jewish civil rights organization, to make sure that the world knows what this regime is doing not only to its Jewish population, Jewish citizens, but all vulnerable groups within its borders, its own citizens.

Other entities are doing important work as the International Religious Freedom Round Table here in the US. International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief is another very good example of a body that pays special attention. In our Congress, the Bipartisan Congressional Coalition, they passed resolutions last session of Congress on behalf of the rights of Iranian Bahai's facing horrific abuses by this regime.

The regime cares about external important voices both on governments and civil society really shining the spotlight on this. I can tell you that we've done a lot of work in making sure that, while the Biden administration is considering all forms of re-engagement, that the human rights angle is not missed. That is not something that is overlooked and put aside, even though Iran's nuclear ambitions is an existential issue, especially for Israel and for the region. We don't want to minimize the threat that Iran's nuclear ambitions pose, but we want to make sure that the human rights infliction that this regime is doing to its own people, and as I mentioned in my earlier answer, really spreading globally. The threat of this regime, just in terms of terrorism, every single continent of the world has been a victim to Iran's support for terrorists' acts of terrorism. It is about human rights. It's about this regimes' propagation and support for terrorist acts, and it takes all of us, governments, civil society, together to keep ensuring that this subject is not lost.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. Sharon, I wanted to also highlight, I'd be interested in your feedback. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, which has been an initiative backed by the Canadian government for a number of years – there've been different rapporteurs of varying commitment and quality. What's your sense of what's come out of that body and that UN instrument in terms of shining a spotlight and gathering evidence on these abuses?

**NAZARIAN:** I think it's not been strong enough. I feel like there's definitely room for better documentation, and also holding the regime to task in varying UN bodies. We feel that there's room for huge amounts of improvement, and how the international bodies hold Iran to task for its own violations of human rights against its own citizens.

**DUBOWITZ:** Before going to Aykan, I want to go back to Marjan as well. Sharon, you weigh in on this. We talk about the importance of human rights being front and center in the U.S. negotiations with the regime over its nuclear program. We talk about human rights and terrorism and IRGC sanctions being defended, regardless of what nuclear deal is reached. But what's your assessment, both of you, of the reality?

I mean, and I say this as a bipartisan criticism. I mean, it's clear to me that the Biden administration is going back into the nuclear deal without any concerns, at least stated concerns, of Iranian human rights abuses. It's clear to me they're going to be lifting some of the most powerful sanctions on terrorism, on the Revolutionary Guards, as part of that return back to the JCPOA. And the Trump administration put out 12 parameters about what a nuclear deal and a broader deal should look like and I personally was frustrated to see that there was no 13th parameter dealing with Iranian human rights. As much as Iranian human rights is something that everybody pays lip service to in both Republican and Democratic administrations, when the rubber hits the road, I mean, are we really seeing a commitment?

And I'll just say one other thing. Many Europeans who talk a good game on Iranian human rights are often even further behind in highlighting egregious abusers, designating them. I think they just came out with some recent human

rights sanctions that, after what, was it five years or eight years of doing nothing on this issue. What's your sense, both of you, of what's going on? Why is this not a priority for Republican administrations, Democratic administrations, and our friends in Europe?

**NAZARIAN:** Maybe I'll just talk a little bit about the Europeans because we had very personal experience. When we established a task force at ADL, the first trip we did was to the European Union in Brussels. I mean, literally that's where we went, because at that time we felt they were the ones who had the most leverage over the Iranians. I'll tell you, we got very cold treatment by many of the MEPs. They paid lip service, but it became very clear to us, actually, Marjan was on that trip with me, and we could tell that, first of all, again, it was seen as a partisan issue. You could see who were the MEPs who were willing to even talk to us. Also, we saw that, yes, they wanted evidence. They want documentation of human rights abuses that we had access to, but there was very little energy around any steps that would be taking. They were mostly critical of the U.S., in terms of playing a good cop to the U.S. bad cop.

I think this is not a U.S. alone issue. I think most, both international bodies and governments, tend to pay lip service. And yet, as you said, when the rubber meets the road, they don't react on it. The way I see it personally is that Europeans have always been more interested in their economic interests when it comes to Iran. And that's, again, not something new, but unfortunately, even though they have this really strong narrative about human rights, there's actually very little effective steps that I see taken.

On the U.S. side, I think the Trump administration, the maximum pressure campaign, inflicting more sanctions, had an effect. There's disagreement about what effect that actually does have in terms of the impact on IRGC and in terms of giving more power to the IRGC because of their monopoly over the economy and how they're able to inflict even more pain in the ways they want to and have more power in the ways that they've already had. I'm not really an expert on sanctions so I won't get into that, but I can tell you that the sanctions specifically targeting terrorists or terrorist activities, whether it's about the National Bank of Iran, lifting those up really, ADL, and we just published, our CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, just published a piece really stating that, that we see that as a step back. That would not be productive. And we have to continue to keep pressure on the regime in the ways that it causes harm around the world through its terrorism acts, as well as domestically towards its own people.

**DUBOWITZ:** I agree. I encourage our viewers to read Jonathan's piece, which I think just came out just today –

**NAZARIAN:** Times of Israel.

**DUBOWITZ:** – In Times of Israel. An excellent piece. Marjan, do you want to pick up on any of that? Also, if you want to include in this, we talked about the reactions of the international community in the U.S. and Europe and everybody to this human rights issue, maybe fold into your answer also the Iranian diaspora and explain to our viewers what's taking place in the Iranian diaspora with respect to perceptions of the regime, a concern over human rights and a willingness of Iranians, both in the United States and abroad, to really hold policymakers accountable for policies that would help advance the freedom and human rights of Iranians.

**GREENBLATT:** There's so much to be said about all of these. First of all, where you began was with the United Nations and the Special Rapporteur on Iran and whether his job has been adequate or not. I think given the limitations that he faces in terms of obtaining information from a country that literally accuses reporting of human rights abuses as an act of espionage, I think we are getting the best that we can expect from Javaid Rehman.

Nonetheless, what is amazing, and I think is consistent with all of these international bodies and all of these enter into the international community in general is that everyone is contradicting themselves. On the one hand, they say they care about some things, and on the other hand, they do nothing to act upon it. So, the Special Rapporteur on Iran, he should have very detailed reports documenting the violence against women in Iran and the terrible repression and control that is imposed on a woman's body from birth until death, and a lack of autonomy and self-determination in a woman at every important stage of her life. Nonetheless, we also see that the same UN body appoints Iran to serve on the Women's Human Rights Council, Women's Rights Commission. It's a travesty. It's a travesty and there was no way to explain it.

Going back to the European Union and their approach in treating human rights, even the Trump administration, which was revered, the 12 points of Pompeo were revered by so many of the ex-pats and the diaspora community members that you're referring to, giving them hope that there will finally be some accountability and some pressure on the Iranian regime to change behaviors. Nonetheless, it did not include anything about human rights. Now, in statements, they were definitely outspoken about human rights issues, whether with Twitter, or messages, or videos, or other solidarity messages that were sent to the Iranian people. There was definitely an acknowledgement of the suffering of the Iranian people.

But when, when we were talking to officials, for example, in France about the ongoing protests in Iran, they said, "We have protests in France all the time. What's the big deal?" Completely being ignorant or pretending like they did not see the difference between protesting in a free country and protesting with empty hands in another country like Iran, where they're waiting to hunt them with guns.

At the end of the day I think, Mark, everyone is thinking about their own pocketbooks. Everyone is thinking about, first of all, their own national security and I understand for the U.S., it's the most important national security is a nuclear issue, but I think that they need to also recognize that the human rights issues in Iran are also a matter of national security outside of Iran. They're not just a problem that is going to stay in Iran. It will come and it will haunt us down here. They are very intertwined, and we have to recognize that.

In terms of the diaspora activism, some of the problems that Aykan was addressing in the beginning are extremely real. You don't have to be just in Turkey outside of a neighboring country with Iran, to feel fear and pressure to remain silent. Many of the reporters outside, around the country and around the world, sorry, have experienced the threats and intimidation from the Iranian regime, limiting their ability to freely report on what they know about the atrocities in the country. In my orbit, there are people who are afraid of even clicking a like or a retweet, living in free countries because the threat and the aggression and the malicious nature of the Iranian government is so palpable and real.

**DUBOWITZ:** It's interesting. I mean, obviously there are people outside of Iran who live in free countries who either out of fear, or business interests inside Iran, or a certain sympathy for the regime in Iran have become witting or unwitting defenders of the regime in Iran, which really complicates the messaging. I mean, it's difficult to find a diasporate that speaks with one voice. I'm sure Sharon, you work with the American Jewish Diaspora. You can speak well about that. American Jews don't speak with one voice about anything. But it complicates the messaging. I mean, it reminds me of the movement against the Soviet Union to free Soviet Jews. I mean, that was actually a striking example where the American Jewish community spoke with one voice and was incredibly effective in holding the Soviet Union to account for their imprisonment of Soviet Jews who wanted to leave.

I think the Soviet analogy also, Aykan, I mean, I know you've been following this. Ray Takeyh had a very interesting piece in the Wall Street Journal the other day. Just taking a lesson from that playbook and the Helsinki Accords and the Helsinki Commission and the Helsinki Process where the United States was able to negotiate with the Soviet Union on arms control issues and nuclear issues. Ran a maximum pressure campaign against the Soviet Union using all instruments of American power and made Soviet repression and human rights abuses a priority, the issue in every interaction that they had with the Soviets.

To your point, Marjan, and I think Sharon as well, I mean the nuclear issue is a priority, but it doesn't mean that you can't actually use the human rights issue as leverage against the regime to hold them accountable for their repression and refuse to make massive concessions on nuclear issues or economic issues without accountability from the regime on human rights.

So Aykan, maybe say a few more words about that. Also, talk a little bit along this theme of what can be done internationally. There are dissidents outside of the U.S. drawing attention to these issues. How do you think Iranian dissidents can resist Iran's attempts to target them within Turkey, and strategies, and alliances, and how do they empower this campaign for a democratic and secular Iran, and really what can the global advocacy community do to help these brave members of the Iranian diaspora in Turkey and then really around the world?

**ERDEMIR:** Now, I think there are two important take home messages here. First of all, Iranian dissidents outside Iran are as likely to be victims of Tehran's egregious human rights violations as their brethren back home. At the same time, Iranian dissidents abroad are as important a resource as Iranian citizens at home to advocate for democracy and secularism and reform within Iran.

Now, when we take a look at Turkey, for example, we see that officially last year there were nearly 70,000 Iranians in Turkey, but unofficial estimates go as high as to half a million. Now one key issue is Turkey does not grant Iranians refugee status because Ankara is party to the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees, but Turkey maintains a geographic limitation, which means Iranians are there only temporarily and so they work with the UNHCR and third countries to seek asylum elsewhere.

Now that's, I think, a first task for the global community, especially for the United States and the European Union. These Iranians are stuck in what we call back in Turkey, "the Turkish waiting room." They're always at the risk of being deported or extradited to Iran, so it's really important for the UNHCR and third countries to basically strengthen cooperation to find safe havens for these individuals. That's the first issue.

The second issue is when Tehran's long arm reaches across the Turkish border, trying to extradite some of these dissidents, public shaming and pressure have proven to deliver results, especially in blocking extradition or deportation attempts. Iranian dissidents themselves have been quite instrumental in using social media and their video feeds or uploads to raise awareness about their situation.

Let me give the example of Maryam Shariatmadari. She was one of the leaders of the Anti-Compulsory Hijab Movement in Iran. She was convicted to a prison sentence and in 2018, she sought refuge in Turkey. When she was detained last September by Turkish authorities, and was about to be deported to Iran, she used social media to raise awareness. When there was a global outrage, Ankara took a step back and she was able to basically escape deportation, which would have definitely meant a lengthy prison term, if not worse in Iran. Let me quote her, and this is I think a very important message from her. She said, "If there was no social media support, I would have been forced to sign the

deportation letter and my fate would have been unclear,” she said. So, that’s, I think, a very important lesson for us all, which means for policymakers, both within the United States and the European Union, there are a few concrete steps that can be taken.

First of all, there needs to be greater funds earmarked for reporting in English, Farsi, and Turkish on the state of dissidents in Turkey and beyond, on the Iranian dissidents in Turkey and beyond. Second, there needs to be a better funded and organized global social media campaigns and activism to raise awareness and to put pressure, not only on Tehran, but also on Ankara and other destinations for Iranian asylum seekers.

Also, it’s important to recognize that because so far, I’ve spoken about Iranian dissidents mainly as victims of Tehran’s long arm, but it’s also important to recognize their agency, their creativity, their resilience in pushing back, in making do. Just to give you a couple of examples, for example, just last year alone, over 7,000 Iranian nationals have taken advantage of Turkey’s citizenship programs by purchasing property in Turkey. And some of them did it for business reasons, but others were dissidents who had the economic means to basically find a safe haven in Turkey. There are numerous studies of Iranian students who have used Turkish universities as steppingstones to get degrees and language skills so that they can take the next step to a European university or a U.S. university or research institution.

So, in all these attempts, Iranian dissidents require solidarity and help. And one interesting and creative aspect of their search for solidarity has been the Iranian dissidents’ tapping into their various identities to find coalition partners. For example, in Turkey, we have Iranian Christian converts joining forces with worldwide Christian advocacy organizations.

We have Iranian gays working together with LGBTI networks. We have Iranian Baha’i working with Baha’i from around the world. We have Iranian Kurds meeting with Turkey’s and Iraq’s and Syria’s Kurdish activists for solidarity. And we have Iranian anti-compulsory hijab activists working with feminists, which was also crucial in saving Shariatmadari from being deported back to Iran, which shows that not only governments, but also advocacy organizations and not just advocacy organizations that solely focus on human rights, but all these other advocacy organizations should find opportunities, avenues of cooperation with Iranian dissidents in Iran and beyond Iran. Because Iranian dissidents, Iranian asylum seekers are very resilient, creative, resourceful in building these solidarity networks. So, they’re simply waiting for a helping hand from around the world.

So, I would like to end by saying that ultimately this all boils down to a concerted push back strategy by the United States and the European Union. I have always been a vocal supporter of concerted transatlantic action. I think ultimately this is the only message that authoritarian regimes can understand. When they see a united Western public opinion, moving with other partners around the world, they take a step back. Appeasement never works with authoritarian regimes, but a concerted push-back strategy with concrete measures, including targeted sanctions, I think is the way to go forwards.

**DUBOWITZ:** Aykan, I think that’s great message and it’s a great action plan with very specific recommendations. So, I want to just bring this fascinating conversation to a conclusion just with a few minutes left, and ask Sharon and Marjan again for final words, thoughts, recommendations before we say goodbye, but we say, we’ll see you later because we know where there’s so much more to get done. We’re going to have more conversations like this, and I know all of us in this conversation are action people and are certainly not going to rest until the regime in Iran starts respecting the rights of its citizens and stops targeting brave Iranians abroad.

**NAZARIAN:** Thanks, Mark. I just want to add a final thought on something we haven't touched on and that's really the social media companies and the platforms that this regime uses very effectively, and that's really building on Aykan's really amazing suggestions. I think that's one more space where ADL has been on the forefront of not only asking for Twitter, for example, to ban Khamenei permanently, but also to do a better job of monitoring.

We know that there is a real weakness in most platforms monitoring other languages. And again, to Aykan's point, both this could be a very – the fact that social media can be used by those outside to bring pressure to the regime, we also know the regime is using this, these platforms to spread their venomous language and rhetoric. So, I think there is important role here for organizations like ADL, that we are already speaking and pressuring the platforms in terms of hate speech that is rampant, rampant on their platforms. But to also make sure that the attention is brought to other languages besides English, to heads of state like Khamenei who use this platform, going against every term of use that Twitter, Facebook has in place. So, that's definitely one more avenue where ADL, we have been advocating on that front, and we'll continue to do that, because that's a very powerful lever that this regime uses in order to spread its hate.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. It is amazing to me. I mean, whatever you say about Facebook, Twitter, other social media platforms, censoring or expelling Americans, there's a whole debate and we're not here to have that debate, but it is remarkable to me that they allow Ali Khamenei, a known Holocaust denier, anti-Semite who has threatened genocide, who's building nuclear weapons to accomplish that goal, who's killed thousands of his own people, who's targeted dissidents around the world, who's responsible for the slaughter in Syria, for the humanitarian disaster in Yemen, that man can remain on Twitter while denying access to Iranians, to that very platform? It strikes me as being something that Twitter and Facebook need to do a whole lot of thinking around. Marjan, any final words, thoughts on this?

**GREENBLATT:** Yeah, just a couple of things. I just want to acknowledge that even this panel itself is an act of solidarity with the Iranian people and is a step closer to raising awareness about human rights violations in Iran. And I want to thank all of you for paying attention to what is happening to Iranians, especially those of you who are not Iranian, but still recognize the value of human rights and the value of human life. Even those who come from a different background and a different geographical locations than you.

And to those people who are also listening to this, I'm also grateful for them because it is not something that is easily accessible through common media, and it's not something fun to talk about. It's really difficult. Some of these topics are extremely difficult, and it demoralizes the reporters and writers who cover them, but also can be very heavy on people who read about them and follow these stories. So, I want to acknowledge that and thank people who are paying attention to this.

One thing that I have been involved with, one project that I have been involved with, in order to enter the conversation about human rights and persecution of Iranian citizens through a non-traditional avenue is by putting a spotlight on what is happening to artists and musicians in Iran. And we are about to release a musical album this coming Friday called *Homanity*, where we are giving a voice to Iranian artists who are censored and banned from performing in Iran, either because of their gender or because of their message or the genre of music that they are performing it. It is a gateway to understanding the simplest freedoms that are denied of Iranian people, both the performers, and also consumers of music and art who can be punished for a simple act of enjoying a piece of music.

So, we hope that there will be more creative efforts from everyone, that people will just tell this story. Our stories don't need to be exactly the same, only authoritarian regimes expect a message that is 100 percent the same across the population. We don't need to agree on 100 percent. We can agree on what is essential, and that's the value of human life.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, I think it's a beautiful way to end. I also say that as non-Iranian, Aykan's a non-Iranian, but I think we're all immigrants to this country. I mean, one thing that I've observed, I grew up in Canada, I've lived in the U.S. for almost 20 years, and wherever Iranians have gone in the world, they have enriched the societies in which they live. They have been incredibly successful in everything they do. And it's a real tragedy that the only place in the world in which Iranians are denied success and prosperity, cultural expression and their human rights is inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. I mean, what an incredible resource the Iranian people are. And yet this leadership, this regime that's been in place for over 40 years and over 40 years too long is the only place in the world that doesn't allow Iranians to be successful and to have free expression.

So, I know everybody here is absolutely committed as Americans to making sure that we continue to hold the regime accountable, to hold our government and governments around the world accountable for this and recognize that the Islamic Republic doesn't only represent threat to Iranians, it represents a threat to Americans given their destructive and dangerous activities. So, thank you to all of you. Thank you to ADL for hosting this with us, and thank you for all your work, over a century of remarkable human rights work. And thank you to the ADL for work on ethnic minorities and religious minorities. It's incredibly important work and we look forward to doing more with you. So, thanks again, everybody, and I wish you all the best.

**NAZARIAN:** Thank you, Mark. Thank you very much.

**GREENBLATT:** Thank you.

**ERDEMIR:** Thank you.